



**Southern African Journal of Communication and Information Science**

Special Issue: Re-imagining Communication and Information Science in  
the Age of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

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**Published Online:**

20 August 2025

**To CITE this article:** Ncube, D, and Ncube, C. 2025. Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) in News: A case study of selected digital-native news outlets in Zimbabwe. *Southern African Journal of Communication and Information Science*. 3 (1): 21-45.

## **Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) in News: A case study of selected digital-native news outlets in Zimbabwe**

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### **Abstract**

The excitement and widespread publicity of OpenAI's Chat Generative Pre-Trained Transformer (ChatGPT) in 2022 further allowed news outlets and journalists to reimagine their interactions and engagements with audience members. Newsrooms, particularly digital-native, have increasingly woven generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as, among others, Google Gemini, ChatGPT, DALL-E 2, Canva, Grammarly, Headline Hero, StoryMap, Chartbeat, GitHub Copilot and Microsoft Copilot into their news production processes. Such AI tools are harnessed for their potential to automate text, image, video and audio creation, streamlining workflows and personalising content. Arguably, these are profound capabilities that are swiftly becoming essential for digital-native news outlets in a competitive environment. This study investigates how four digital-native news outlets, namely *Matabeleland Pulse*, *Community Podium*, Centre for Innovation and Technology (CITE), and *Eco Climate Network*, are adopting generative AI, their motivation in deploying such tools, and how newsroom leaders perceive the influence of these tools on journalistic practice. The study is anchored on the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) framework, which emphasises that social, economic and cultural forces shape the adoption of technologies as much as technical efficiency does. This study analyses this phenomenon along the three axes of the journalistic field. These are, (i) techno-economic means, that is, financial and technical resources that enable or constrain an adoption, (ii) subject of journalism, that is, journalists' perspectives on AI in their professional practice and (iii) object of journalism, that is, audience reception, trust and engagement with AI-generated content from the newsroom editor's perspective. The study employs a qualitative design methodology using online surveys and brief follow-up interviews with newsroom leaders.

**Keywords:** Artificial Intelligence; Generative AI; Digital native news outlets; Audience engagement; Participatory journalism

## Introduction

The frenzy publicity of OpenAI's Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer (ChatGPT) in November 2022 and subsequent generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies that can generate text, images, sound and data motivated this study. The interest is to investigate the uptake of generative AI in the Global South — particularly in Zimbabwe's digital-native newsrooms — their motivations for the deployment of these tools and the influence of these AI tools on journalistic practice. Digital-native media refers to news enterprises that solely position themselves to engage with their audiences online (Newman et. al 2019). According to Media and Communication (2020:1-2), "their digital nature emphasise the tendency towards an early adoption of new technologies...deeper experimentation with multimedia storytelling formats... and more diversification in business models". Ogola's (2023) study concludes that media organisations and journalists across the African continent are variously adopting the use of the most 'disruptive' technological development, and Zimbabwe is no exception to this trend. The scholar argues that the digital technological 'revolution,' which has been in existence for nearly two decades now, has necessitated a shift from traditional (offline) news media to online news institutions, which solely position their digital platforms as their primary brands. It is such news outlets that this study refers to as digital-native (digi-native) newsrooms. These news outlets strive to come up with innovative ways of interacting with their audiences in the digital space. The population of this study are digital-native (digi-native) news outlets, namely: *Matabeleland Pulse*, *Community Podium*, Centre for Information and Technology (CITE) and *Eco Climate Network*.

The study focuses on non-mainstream digital-native news outlets in Matabeleland, a region in Zimbabwe. It investigates how, despite lacking infrastructure and funding, marginal journalism players creatively adopt freely available AI tools to sustain their existence, engage audiences and preserve editorial integrity. The study employed Marconi's (2020) and Mitchell's (2019) definitions of AI. Marconi (2020:7) refers to AI as "smart machines that learn from experiences and perform human-like tasks", further arguing that in journalism it is the "augmenting" and not "automating" the industry. The scholar argues that journalists "must adopt a more iterative form of their craft, one that leverages new technologies to respond in real-time to the rapidly changing information needs of audiences" (ibid: 8). According to Mitchell (2019:8), AI is the "activity of computationally simulating human activities and skills in narrowly defined domains, most commonly through the application of machine learning approaches, a subfield

of AI, in which machines learn from data or their performance”. Simply put, the AI ‘learning’ is an important feature: “outcomes are ‘learned’ and iteratively optimised from (new) data or past performance, thus (ideally) improving the system’s quality and efficiency at certain tasks over time” (Simon, 2022:1834).

## **Background**

The Matabeleland region, like most parts of Zimbabwe, exemplifies the phenomenon of a news desert. Ferrier (2014) defines news deserts as geographical areas and/or communities without access to fresh local news and information that feeds ‘grassroots democracy’. These are regions where a void in public interest reporting exists due to the decline of traditional newspaper bureaus serving them. This has led to a significant lack of journalistic organisations that have the means to serve local communities with news and information. In response to this scenario, digital-native news outlets such as *CITE*, *Community Podium*, *Matabeleland Pulse* and *Eco Climate Network* have emerged to address this gap. These organisations have increasingly adopted generative AI technologies, including ChatGPT, Google Gemini, DALL-E 2, Meta-AI, Grammarly, Chartbeat, Headliner and Datawrapper to enhance news production, distribution and audience engagement. These tools offer opportunities to streamline operations and augment relationships with audiences. The audience is no longer the passive, ‘imagined,’ ignored quantity that the traditional media viewed it to be (Bunce, 2015; Hermida, 2020).

Contemporary news editors refer to audience metrics when making story selection, presentation and headline testing, thereby fostering more responsive and participatory journalism. Journalism that provides audiences with preferred news content, amplifying issues ignored by elite media and providing an alternative space for public engagement. However, the adoption of AI and its related technologies remains uneven across Africa, hindered by the continent’s history of marginality. Thus, the varying levels of technologies between the Global North and the Global South, differences in digital literacies, as well as infrastructural development (Chadha and Steiner, 2015). In light of existing literature on AI in Journalism, this study contributes by focusing on under-researched, digital-native newsrooms operating in a marginalised region in Zimbabwe. Previous research has mainly focused on well-resourced urban or national-level media. This study provides insight into how underfunded and emergent outlets in news deserts adopt AI tools to overcome structural and economic constraints.

Applying the SCOT framework, the study illustrates how social and cultural contexts shape AI deployment in grassroots journalism.

The paper focuses on four digital-native news outlets, namely *Matabeleland Pulse*, *Eco Climate Network*, *CITE*, and *Community Podium*. *Matabeleland Pulse*, a digital-native news outlet founded on 5 June 2024, is a community-centric response to systematic failures in how stories from the Matabeleland region were being covered in the country's mainstream media. The newsroom, comprising of reporters and citizen journalists telling some of their stories in local languages, is committed to promoting accountability, climate justice and social equity, celebrating indigenous cultures and heritage as well as practicing solutions-oriented journalism. Importantly, the newsroom's objective is to deliver journalism rooted in the lived experiences of the Matabeleland communities. In just nine months, the news outlet moved from WhatsApp-based reporting to AI integration via the Ndebele-speaking virtual presenter MaMthembo, who played multiple roles such as health explainer. However, this was temporary shutdown due to funding issues. *Eco Climate Network*, founded in 2024 in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, is an independent non-profit media organization focused on climate, environmental, and cybersecurity issues. It uses participatory storytelling to bridge the digital and information gap in underrepresented communities, especially in Matabeleland. The network empowers marginalized voices—particularly women—through multimedia content, community workshops, and advocacy campaigns. It promotes climate awareness, conservation, digital inclusion, and online safety. By partnering with local groups and training grassroots storytellers, *Eco Climate Network* helps drive policy dialogue and sustainable development.

*CITE*, founded in 2016 in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, is a digital-native non-profit media and civic-tech hub. It delivers independent journalism covering politics, governance, environment, human rights, and social issues. Known for innovative civic tools like Promise Tracker, Fix My City, and Rate My Councillor, *CITE* promotes accountability and citizen engagement in local and national governance. It pioneered the use of AI in Zimbabwean newsrooms with its virtual presenter Alice and regularly hosts forums on journalism innovation, including regional conferences on AI in media. *Community Podium* is a digital non-profit participatory media organisation founded in 2019 and officially registered as a trust in 2020 in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. It supports and trains community content creators across rural Matabeleland, Midlands, and Masvingo, empowering marginalized voices—especially around governance, climate justice, and gender issues. To date, it has trained over 60 citizen reporters, facilitating

storytelling, advocacy, and civic participation. Its initiatives have driven real impact—mobilising resources to build clinics, schools, and borehole, following community reporting.

## **Artificial Intelligence in journalism**

Contemporary digitisation of news has profoundly reshaped the news industry (Kalogeropoulos et. al. 2019), intensifying competition among news outlets. AI, with its ability to generate text, images, and multimedia content efficiently, provide one potential solution to this challenge. The different types of tools engaged are Natural Language Processing (NLP), Natural Language Generation (NLG), AI Design and Image Generation tools, Real Time Analytics and Machine Learning Tools and General-Purpose Generative AI Assistant (Diakopoulos, 2019). News outlets have adopted AI — reshaping news production, content personalisations, and journalistic practices. Carlson (2015) and Diakopoulos (2019) argue that algorithms are employed to streamline journalistic processes by transforming raw data into narratives, and these algorithms produce content with minimal human intervention. The use of AI in algorithmic journalism has been noted in countries such as the United States, where Associated Press is using Wordsmith for automated earnings reports, and the United Kingdom, where The Guardian is experimenting with automated journalism tools for sports and election reporting, while Germany's algorithmic news initiatives, like Deutsche Welle focus on personalised news delivery.

Recent global studies indicate a growing integration of AI technologies in newsrooms, improving workflows and efficiency, analysing audience feedback and developing ideas for subsequent reporting projects (Beckett, 2023; Associated Press, 2023; Brannon et al., 2024). Digital-native news outlets in particular consistently innovate to retain and grow their readers and audiences. Thurman et al. (2019) investigate the adoption of technologies that are reshaping audience engagement and customising content based on user preferences. Technological affordances, newsroom routines and hierarchies predominantly shape the integration and adoption of new technologies and innovations (Domingo, 2008; Westlund and Krumsvik, 2014). Roles and routines shift with the adoption of technological innovations (Lewis and Westlund, 2015). In some contexts, the shifts are unprecedented. Hansen and Roca-Sales (2017: 2) assert that “now that journalists are using AI in the newsroom, what must they know about these technologies, and what must technologists know about journalistic standards

when building them?” Their enquiry raises concern about the implications of AI use in newsrooms on journalistic practices.

Scholars in both the Global North and Global South advocate for context-based ethical guidelines in the adoption of AI within newsrooms. Dorr and Hollnbuchner (2017) examine the ethical challenges posed by AI-driven journalism, including accountability, job displacement, and the authenticity of news. Shihomeka (2024) raises concerns about misinformation and inadequate training among journalists in the African context, advocating for tailored ethical guidelines to address these challenges. Additionally, Gondwe (2023) highlights the unrepresentative nature of online databases and issues of plagiarism, emphasising the need for localised solutions. In a study on audience perceptions of AI-driven news presenters in Zimbabwe, Ndlovu (2024) underscores the importance of maintaining journalistic standards amid technological advancements.

In Africa, the primary use cases for AI are found in Kenya and South Africa, where well-resourced media organisations have invested in several premium AI systems and developed custom-built AI tools (Ogola, 2023). In contrast, smaller media organisations either have not adopted AI in their newsroom processes or rely heavily on open-source tools (ibid, 2023). Ogola (2023) notes that the most commonly used AI systems are functional AI applications deployed in content/news gathering, content processing, content/news distribution, and audience engagement, as well as various editorial practices. While the scholar expresses optimism about the adoption of generative AI tools in African newsrooms due to their functional efficiency, several obstacles hinder this adoption, including the high cost of technology, a lack of technical skills, and insufficient quality data for training AI models (Kioko et al., 2022). Furthermore, the predominance of Euro-American training data in AI tools contributes to digital epistemic injustices (Gondwe, 2023). The AI tools currently utilised across African newsrooms originate from Western countries and are programmed with values that do not necessarily align with African contexts, raising concerns about digital colonialism (Goffi, 2023; Adams, 2021; Mollema, 2024; Nyaaba et al., 2024). In response, Ndlovu (2024) advocates for the development of AI tools that are sensitive to African cultural, epistemic, and audience-centric concerns.

## **Theoretical premise**

This study is anchored in the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) framework, which posits that technology does not evolve in isolation (Bijker, 1995) but is shaped by the social, economic, and cultural contexts in which it is developed and utilised. This means that AI tools are not adopted solely based on their technical superiority; rather, they are influenced by the needs, values, and resources of the newsrooms employing them. The SCOT framework challenges technological determinism by emphasising that technology is defined by its users and communities through ongoing negotiations, interpretations, and appropriations. Consequently, AI tools are locally reinterpreted in ways that reflect the newsroom's resources, values, needs, and power structures.

The study focuses on three key axes of the journalistic field as informed by SCOT: (i) techno-economic means, which examines how financial and technical resources influence the adoption and integration of AI in newsrooms; (ii) subject of journalism, which considers how AI is perceived by journalists, editors, and news directors, particularly regarding their professional identities and ethical standards; and (iii) object of journalism, which explores how AI-generated content is received by audiences, including its impact on trust, engagement, and the perceived value of journalism. By employing the SCOT framework, the researchers argue that the adoption of AI in digital-native newsrooms is more about contextual adaptation than disruption. This contributes to the growing body of literature that critiques Western-centric AI narratives by demonstrating how media organisations in the Global South reshape AI technologies to meet specific local needs (Ogola, 2023; Smith & Jones, 2024).

## **Methodological premise**

To gather rich, in-depth insights into the use of generative AI tools by digital-native news outlets, this study employed qualitative surveys and key informant interviews (KIIs). These interviews, conducted through a combination of online surveys and in-person discussions, aimed to collect information from individuals who are experts or knowledgeable about generative AI—a contemporary phenomenon under investigation. The study prioritised newsroom leaders, including directors, editors, and program officers, who often serve dual roles as journalists due to financial constraints that limit the hiring of full-time in-house journalists.

These key informants were selected based on their roles in guiding newsroom innovation and overseeing AI-related adoption. They were identified through purposive sampling, which



targeted individuals whose experience and expertise were deemed valuable for the study. Similarly, purposive sampling was employed to select digital-native newsrooms based on specific criteria: being fully digital-native (without print or broadcast legacies), having an operational presence in the Matabeleland region, demonstrating use and experimentation with generative AI tools in editorial processes, and, importantly, ensuring leadership accessibility and willingness to participate in research activities.

Participants were chosen not only for their leadership roles but also for their direct involvement in AI tool experimentation, editorial decision-making, and their capacity to address both operational constraints and the strategic direction of their newsrooms. In total, four digital-native newsrooms were selected as case studies, generating six responses through an online survey, which included two in-depth follow-up interviews. The online survey, disseminated via Google Forms, targeted the following digital-native newsrooms: *Community Podium*, *CITE*, *Matabeleland Pulse*, and *Eco Climate Network*. The participants were; Mary Jane Nkiwane (*Eco Climate Network* Director), Lesley Moyo (*CITE* Editor), Sean Ndlovu (*CITE* Product Manager), Peter Moyo (*Matabeleland Pulse* Director), Rumbidzai Mhlanga (*Matabeleland Pulse* Editor) and Sihlobo Bulala (*Community Podium* Editor and Programs Lead). The participants consented to their real names being used. The survey comprised both closed-ended and open-ended questions regarding the types of AI tools being used, their perceived benefits, the motivations behind their adoption, and ethical concerns. Online survey, via a Google Form, was sent to respondents on the 5th of September 2024 while follow-up interviews with *Eco Climate Network* Director, Mary Jane Nkiwane and *Community Podium* Editor and Programs Lead, Sihlobo Bulala were done on the 9th and 12th of September 2024 respectively

The two follow-up in-depth interviews were conducted in person, lasting at least 20 minutes each, based on participant availability. These interviews facilitated a deeper exploration of resource constraints, adaptation strategies, decision-making processes, and editorial shifts within the newsrooms. Notably, one interview led to the inclusion of *Eco Climate Network* in the study, despite its limited social media engagement and infrequently updated website. Direct discussions with its leadership revealed that financial constraints hindered the outlet's ability to obtain a professionally designed website. The inclusion of *Eco Climate Network* aligned with the study's broader aim of documenting AI adoption not only in high-performing digital environments but also in marginal and under-resourced settings where innovation is driven by

necessity and resilience rather than visibility. Although the sample size of six participants may seem small, it accurately reflects the narrow leadership structures and multitasking roles typical of lean, underfunded newsrooms in the region. Therefore, the sample was appropriate for generating rich, context-specific insights given the qualitative and exploratory nature of this study. Thematic analysis was employed to present and analyse the data collected. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, the researchers first familiarised themselves with the data, then generated initial codes both inductively and deductively. These codes were subsequently collated into broader themes aligned with the SCOT framework, and the emergent themes were reviewed and refined. Final themes were defined and named, allowing for interpretation of the findings in relation to the theoretical constructs and research questions.

This analytic method aligns with Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006, p. 4) assertion that thematic analysis "is a form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become the categories for analysis." Consequently, thematic analysis was utilised to identify recurring patterns and themes from the survey responses and in-person interviews, particularly regarding the motivations for AI adoption, newsroom leaders' perspectives on AI's impact, and the practical challenges faced. The data were further interpreted in relation to the SCOT framework, particularly across its three key axes: (a) techno-economic means—the financial and infrastructural conditions that enable or hinder AI use; (b) subject of journalism—the journalistic ethics and negotiations surrounding AI; and (c) object of journalism—audience trust, engagement, and reactions to AI-generated content. Analysing the data through the SCOT lens revealed that AI adoption is not solely driven by technical considerations, but is also deeply embedded in the social and cultural realities of these marginalised newsrooms in Zimbabwe.

## **Data analysis and discussion**

The study aimed to explore the adoption and use of generative AI tools in four selected newsrooms, focusing on motivations and editorial perspectives on AI, its impact on journalistic practices, audience engagement, and ethical considerations surrounding its use. The findings revealed key insights into how generative AI tools are being integrated into these digital-native newsrooms in Matabeleland, along with broader implications for journalism. Guided by the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) framework, the data were presented and analysed using thematic analysis. The study established the interpretive flexibility of technologies by

examining the socially constructed meanings of generative AI tools as articulated by newsroom leaders in Zimbabwe. It highlights that their experiences, choices, and power dynamics shape technology adoption, primarily motivated by perceived survival and sustainability rather than innovation (Bijker, 1995). Data were collected through an online survey and in-person semi-structured interviews with newsroom staff members. These findings underscore the complexities and nuances of integrating generative AI tools within the specific context of Matabeleland's media landscape, emphasising the need for a tailored understanding of technology's role in journalism.

### **Generative AI's operational efficiency and cost-effectiveness**

The study established that the digital-native newsrooms under investigation harnessed AI tools to enhance operational efficiency, allowing lean teams to scale up content production. Due to financial constraints, the integration of AI into the workflow has facilitated the automation of routine tasks such as news writing, editing, and content scheduling. This automation not only reduces workload but also saves time and labour.

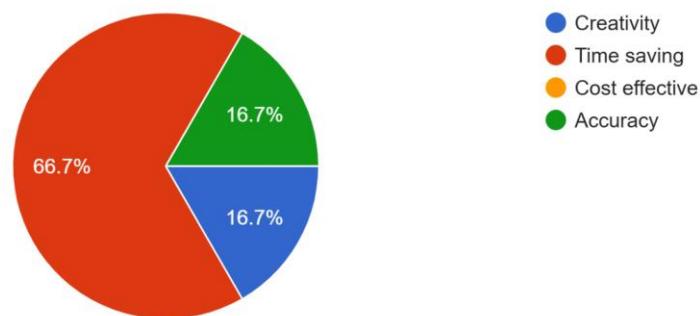
*Community Podium* Editor and Programs Lead, Sihlobo Bulala, explained:

Our newsroom has limited staff therefore, using Generative AI tools ensures that we can achieve certain production objectives at a low cost allowing the money saved to go towards the securement of equipment as compared to paying an additional staff, albeit without the required resources. They [AI tools] also spark creativity within the team as the possibility of content creation becomes endless.

Newsroom leaders also mentioned that the uptake of AI into their daily practice created time for journalists to focus more on investigative reporting.

### What motivates you to use Generative AI?

6 responses



Newsroom leaders around the world are adopting the use of AI for a range of purposes. These include back-end automation (tagging, transcription, copyediting); content distribution and recommendation; personalized user experiences via custom homepages and alerts; AI-assisted content creation (summaries, headlines, graphics, videos) with human oversight; newsgathering support (story identification, data analysis); commercial uses such as improved subscription models; and support for coding and product development (Reuters Institute 2025). Conversely, some digital newsrooms in Zimbabwe mainly use AI for bulletins and grammar correction to increase output. This validates one of the three axes of the Social Construction of Technology theory, namely the subject of journalism, which takes into consideration how AI is perceived by journalists, editors, and news directors, particularly in relation to their professional identities. *CITE* Editor, Lesley Moyo, explained:

AI tools can automate the production of routine news items such as financial reports, sports summaries and weather updates. This allows us journalists to focus on more complex and investigative stories. By automating repetitive tasks, newsrooms can better allocate resources and optimize their operations, potentially leading to cost savings and more efficient workflows.

Concurring with *CITE* Director, *Eco Climate Network* Director, Mary Jane Nkiwane acknowledged that Generative AI enabled them to generate story ideas and find new angles to existing stories, which further enriches their editorial output. The director added that the AI tools played a crucial role in managing and analysing vast amounts of data, enabling them to identify trends and insights that “might otherwise be missed through human error”. Studies

show that newsrooms adopt AI to enhance sustainability through cost-cutting, automation, and improved efficiency.

In addition, the study revealed that these digital-native newsrooms mostly relied on AI's freemium tools, which enable content production at minimal costs. Newsroom editors and directors acknowledged their 'beginner' and 'intermediate' skill levels, highlighting differences in how each outlet integrates AI. This highlights a key SCOT framework axis: financial and technical resources shape AI adoption, as seen in reliance on freemium tools by resource-constrained digital-native newsrooms. *Matabeleland Pulse* Director, Peter Moyo, noted that free AI tools have been helpful in their newsroom as "we do not have money to purchase the commercial tools, hence the free ones have enabled us to produce decent content without spending". These findings align with Westlund and Krumsvik (2014) and Smith and Jones (2024) who argue that small newsrooms adopt AI not out of a desire for innovation, but out of necessity. This study establishes that for digital-native newsrooms, AI functions as a survival mechanism rather than a tool of disruption, offering a counter-narrative to the prevailing global perspective that views AI as a "disruptive" technology.

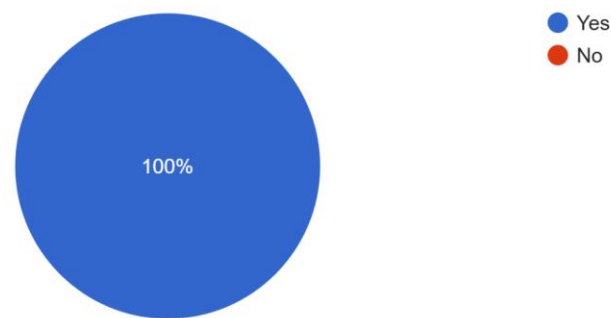
Similarly, Bijker (1995) asserts that the adopters of technology shape its meaning. This implies that Matabeleland's digital-native newsrooms are adopting generative AI tools to meet their social needs—specifically, to boost productivity and compensate for their inability to maintain a large workforce. Social and economic contexts play a pivotal role in technology adoption. Thus, these findings support SCOT's techno-economic axes, as evidenced by the choice of free or low-cost AI tools by the digital-native newsrooms under study. This choice stems from limited financial and human capital, rather than a drive to push technological boundaries, which is often observed in established Western newsrooms.

### **Audience engagement: Content personalisation and engagement strategies**

The study established that audience engagement is an important mission that news outlets aim to achieve, and hence, they constantly seek new strategies to attract and retain audiences. The frenzied publicity surrounding OpenAI's ChatGPT and the emergence of subsequent generative AI technologies capable of producing text, images, sound and data prompted the newsrooms under study to seize the opportunity and harness these technologies for journalistic innovation — particularly around audience engagement.

Is audience engagement an important mission that your news outlet aims to achieve

6 responses



Newsroom leaders highlighted that AI tools enhance consistency and content scheduling, further enabling content personalisation and engagement strategies. *Community Podium* Editor and Program Lead explained:

We create posters of major and impactful stories using Canva and through our audience metrics, such content engages our audiences. We also use ChatGPT to refine our headlines and this has been useful in expanding the manner in which we frame our news as reporting an issue over and over can become redundant therefore, this ensures that our audience read our stories with a fresh perspective. Being consistent with post scheduling ensures that we retain a loyal following.

Newsroom leaders acknowledged the use of AI tools to drive user engagement across platforms through consistency in content production and scheduling posts. Additionally, AI is being used for creating visuals and refining headlines. News outlets now use A/B testing to compare headline variations and identify which version best engages audiences (Nieman Lab, 2021). This shows that a story's headline has the potential to draw in more readers, hence harnessing AI tools for such innovativeness.

The study also revealed that ChatGPT is being used to generate and summarise long-form narrative reports into concise bullet points — enhancing user experience by allowing readers to grasp the essence of a story before deciding to engage with the full text. In the same vein, *Eco Climate Network* Director, Mary Jane Nkiwane, noted that AI enables analysis of audience engagement, preferred content topics, formats, and optimal distribution channels. Importantly,

newsroom leaders for these news outlets believe that consistent content publishing positively feeds into their audience reach and engagement funnel. However, their consistency is limited by factors like the skills gap, to address website or technical glitches and limited resources to outsource technical staff. This, according to Nkiwane, has significantly affected *Eco Climate Network*, resulting in them pausing online publishing. *CITE* Editor, Lesley Moyo, further added:

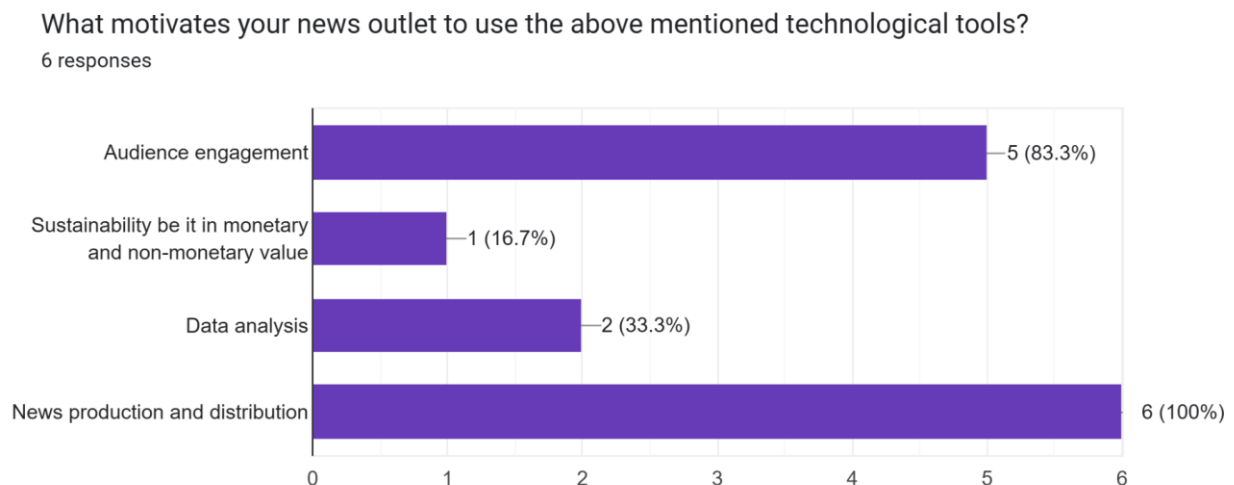
Generative AI tools not only enable us to create high-quality, scalable content, but also empowers us to deliver more targeted, dynamic, and interactive experiences that engage audiences across the various platforms where our content is distributed.

Lastly, the study found that the digital-native news outlets ensure that they tailor content for diverse audiences, including rural/marginalised and visually impaired communities. This is a novel contribution established by this study, as existing literature does not include marginalised groups. Content personalisation emerges, not for commercial purposes for these newsrooms, but for inclusivity and democratic participation. This finding aligns with Ferrier's (2014) concept of news deserts, which calls for responsive journalism. These digital-native newsrooms further achieve inclusivity by employing generative AI tools to convert text to audio formats for different audiences. Audience segmentation is promoted, ensuring that different audience preferences are catered for. Audience segmentation facilitates the prioritisation of different audience needs. This is a process of grouping people based on shared characteristics, which can then be used to create more targeted campaigns and tailored messaging that resonates with the target audiences (GWI, 2025). *Community Podium* Editor and Programs Lead explained:

Some of our visually impaired audiences set their mobile phones on audio such that the texts they receive are automatically translated to audio. Nowadays, websites can also automatically reproduce articles to audio format, offering options to consume a story by reading text or listening to audio.

The study, therefore, concluded that the integration of generative AI tools within these digital-native newsrooms reflects a strategic shift towards enhancing content quality, tone, and relatability while simultaneously facilitating cost-effective and impactful audience engagement. This highlights a notable reconfiguration of audience relationships. Power

dynamics have notably shifted from news creator-centred reporting to news consumer-centred reporting (Napoli, 2011). Tandoc and Maitra (2018) emphasise that this poses tension between editorial independence and data-driven content creation and highlight the power of audience metrics in reshaping editorial focus. It further established that the AI tools being used are instrumental in driving innovation through experimentation with emerging storytelling formats such as AI-generated visuals and text-to-speech functionalities.



Important to note is that the adoption of generative AI is reshaping journalistic practices, as argued by the SCOT framework, by redefining newsroom roles — positioning AI as both an assistive and generative agent. Hence, the deployment of these tools signals a broader transformation in digital journalism — where technological affordances are harnessed to advance both operational efficiency and audience-centric reporting.

### **Ethical concerns and threats to originality**

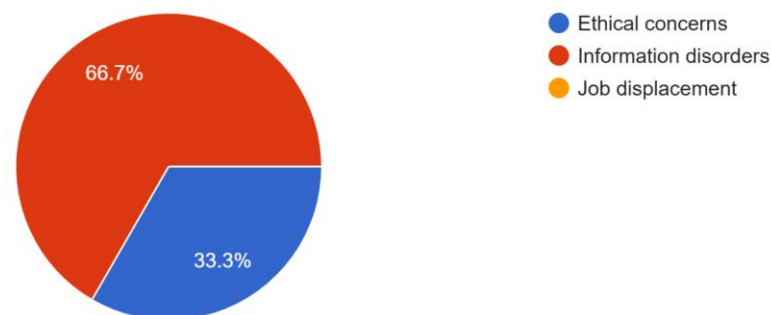
The study further established a concern among newsroom leaders over the loss of journalistic originality, information disorders and the ethical boundaries of AI use in newsrooms. Digital-native news outlets acknowledged that AI tools may spread disinformation, resulting in the proliferation of misleading content. Scholars call this ‘AI hallucinations’ — a term which describes the production of fake or misleading information in a way that can seem trustworthy (Sun et al., 2024). Thus, AI-generated content must always be supervised. However, as argued by Caned, Linden and Herrero (2024), humans do not seem to be good supervisors and tend to become lazy, resulting in inaccurate information being disseminated to the public. *Community*



*Podium* Editor and Programs Lead corroborated previous research stating that the use of AI in digital journalism has resulted in the creation of misleading information to suit agendas, and “misinformation engineers are taking advantage by tapping into people’s biases through feeding them misleading information to control the narratives”.

What concerns do you have about Generative AI?

6 responses



Additionally, concerns about algorithmic bias were a dominant theme in this study. Beckett (2019) highlights that humans are inherently biased; hence, algorithms can also exhibit bias. These findings reiterate fears of AI-generated misinformation, as articulated in related studies by Shihomeka (2024) and Gondwe (2023). This means that AI tools can be biased just as skewed training data, thereby reinforcing rather than correcting structural inequalities in news coverage. These concerns are further amplified by a regulatory vacuum that can be widely accepted to govern the operational or editorial use of AI in journalism. Zimbabwean newsroom leaders articulated that they were grappling with the absence of clear ethical frameworks, reinforcing the need for locally developed policies that fit their resource-constrained and socio-politically marginalised context.

Scholars like Dorr and Hollnbunchner (2017) and Ndlovu (2024) recommend context-specific ethical frameworks, particularly for Africa. This study revealed that, in Zimbabwe, ethical responsibilities are left to individual newsrooms to devise ad hoc safeguards that differ greatly in rigour and transparency. This study further found that without such systems put in place, AI errors and mistakes can scale just as quickly as efficiencies, thereby possessing potential of eroding public trust. *Matabeleland Pulse* Director, Peter Moyo, explained:

In our experience, generative AI sometimes hallucinates and gives inaccurate or expired information. It is not customised enough for our Zimbabwean/African context. I have flagged quite a number of AI generated stories whereby almost the whole story is generated by AI with very little journalistic input. The originality of such stories is highly compromised.

In the same vein, participants expressed anxieties over originality and authorship, observing that AI-generated content has the potential to blur the “lines in originality” (*Matabeleland Pulse* Director, Peter Moyo) — a development that is complicating established norms of intellectual ownership and by-line attribution in journalism. Thus, generative AI adoption in digital journalism raises questions about the human creative contribution that traditionally underwrites journalistic credibility. Authenticity, public trust, and journalistic creativity are therefore affected in such a context. This aligns with Ndlovu’s (2024) insights on AI anchors lacking emotional resonance, directly echoing participants’ concerns over reduced journalistic creativity and blurred authorship.

*Eco Climate Network* Director, Mary Jane Nkiwane’s, sentiments were also consistent with this finding. She acknowledged that “journalists will be less creative in terms of writing stories in their way and the reliance on AI will limit their creativity in the newsrooms”. Additionally, some participants warned that in absent clear AI use guidelines, AI-assisted stories could be ‘weaponised’ to flood information ecosystems with low-cost content masquerading as original content. *CITE* Editor, Lesley Moyo, noted that, “in the wrong hands, AI-generated content can be weaponised to spread disinformation or propaganda, undermining trust in news and media”. This study therefore, concluded that for digital journalism, transparency now includes not only citing human sources but also disclosing when and how extensively automation tools have shaped the narratives.

Theoretically, from the techno-economic axis, the ethical challenges surrounding generative AI adoption in these digital-native newsrooms are tightly coupled to the uneven distribution of financial and technical resources. Such smaller newsrooms with niche markets often deploy off-the-shelf systems with minimal oversight, further heightening the risk of ethical lapses, whereas well-resourced news outlets can afford proprietary models, specialised staff, and rigorous audit tools to detect bias and misinformation. Such differences, therefore, shape not

only whether AI is adopted but also the degree to which its ethical implications can be managed.

At the level of the subject of journalism, journalists and editors are renegotiating professional identity in response to automation. Journalists and newsroom leaders with access to AI tools are reframing their role from primary content producers to supervisory curators who prompt, verify and contextualise AI outputs. This is consistent with this study's findings — where in under-resourced newsrooms, as is the case — ethical mandate to preserve accuracy and originality becomes a key rhetorical resource through which they assert continued professional authority over algorithmic collaborators. These ethical concerns, as expressed in the findings of this study, reflect broader patterns identified by Shihomeka (2024) and Montal and Reich (2017) regarding skills gaps, misinformation risks and the question of originality. Authenticity, public trust, and journalistic creativity are therefore affected in such a context. The study also reveals that audiences perceive AI-generated journalism as lacking emotional depth, sentiments expressed by Ndlovu (2024). In addition, the findings affirm Gondwe's (2023) concern that Western-trained AI tools often fail to resonate with African newsroom needs — underscoring the urgent need for localisation in both tool design and ethical governance.

### **Adaptability challenges and skills gap**

The study established that AI adaptability remains elusive in digital journalism. Participants expressed concern over the rapid evolution of AI tools, the lack of clear ethical and practical frameworks, and the delay in the full realisation and harnessing of the technologies. *Community Podium* Editor and Programs Lead, Sihlobo Bulala, explained:

The ever-changing tech environment where there's always a new thing that needs to be tried out without mastering one. Ethical guidelines are not yet clearly defined, and it can be a bit perplexing. Journalists and newsroom leaders who aren't boundary pushers can remain behind as they may find most of the ethically inclined things confusing including appropriate use of these tools for maximum benefit.

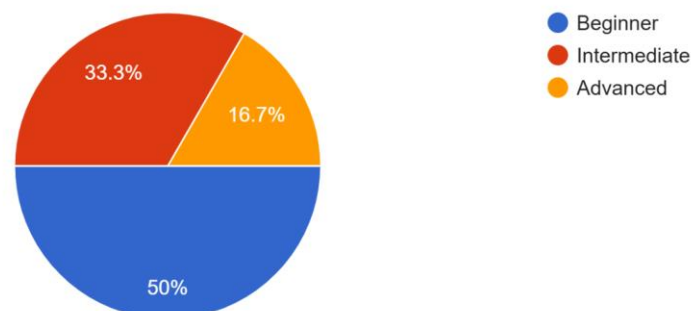
This suggests that the absence of locally contextualised policies fosters a risk-averse culture in newsrooms, which then inhibits experimentation with the AI tools. Arguably, these uncertainties with technology corroborate Gschwantner et al.'s (2016) framework of

organisational ambidexterity, wherein exploratory innovation stalls when exploitation risks are perceived as too high. As a result, digital-native newsrooms serving the Matabeleland region and its surrounding areas, including Bulawayo, oscillate between cautious trial and inertia, therefore, delaying the full harnessing of AI’s potential.

Although AI technologies expose the skills gaps in newsrooms, they also offer palliative solutions — bridging gaps in editing and design skills for lean newsroom teams. Participants surveyed in this study acknowledged that with a lean staff, their digital-native news outlets could achieve their goals “when their work is completed by AI through offering skills they are not naturally gifted in, for instance, copy-editing, layout, data visualisations and sometimes proofreading stories” (*Eco Climate Network* Director, Mary Jane Nkiwane). Thus, for lean editorial teams, AI tools have the potential to expand production capacity without proportional labour costs — echoing findings by Smith and Jones (2024) that AI can ‘flatten’ skill hierarchies in small newsrooms. It is for this reason that this study concluded that generative AI, in digital journalism, functions as a capability amplifier despite a limited headcount in each newsroom.

What is your level of experience using generative AI?

6 responses



Lastly, newsroom leaders were concerned about the uneven access to AI infrastructure, which then results in adaptability and skills challenges. These digital-native newsrooms in Matabeleland are confronted with pronounced techno-economic constraints, which then shape their capacity to adopt generative AI tools. *Matabeleland Pulse* Director, Peter Moyo, cited “high cost of licensing and implementation of generative AI tools” as a primary barrier, concurring with *CITE* Editor, Lesley Moyo, who noted that “some of the generative AI tools

are expensive to purchase”. This finding aligns with the techno-economic axis of the SCOT theory, which states that capital intensity governs both the pace and the ethical robustness of technological uptake (Mansell, 2012). Unlike larger and established news outlets, which probably benefit from diversified revenue streams, can afford proprietary services and in-house teams, smaller digital-native news start-ups rely on freemium or open-source applications with limited functionalities. It is such a resource asymmetry that not only delays adoption but also widens quality gaps in news production across regional and international news platforms.

The findings reflect Domingo’s (2008) assertion that technological innovations are entrenched in newsroom practices, culture and routines, thereby impeding the adoption of their full technological capabilities. The findings from Matabeleland’s digital-native outlets reveal a surface-level adoption of tools like ChatGPT and Canva for correcting grammatical errors and layout support. This is largely guided by editorial tradition as opposed to technological possibility. Posetti, Bell and Brown (2021) validate the existence of skills and institutional constraints in technological adoption in the Global South. In addition, this study reveals how roles shift from creators to curators, an observation supported by Carlson (2015), who analysed the impact of automation on journalistic labour and authority.

## **Conclusion**

This study established that resource-constrained digital-native newsrooms in Zimbabwe adopt generative AI tools out of operational necessity rather than innovation. These news outlets leverage technological advancements to address staffing limitations, improve production speed, and sustain news output despite financial constraints. This finding aligns with the SCOT framework, which posits that technology adoption is shaped more by contextual needs and constraints than by technical sophistication. Consequently, the adoption of freely available tools is driven by the imperative to survive and maintain visibility in an increasingly competitive digital ecosystem.

Additionally, this study offers several recommendations for digital-native newsrooms operating in similar underfunded contexts. Firstly, it is essential for these newsrooms to prioritize capacity training in the ethical and editorial use of freemium AI tools to maximize output while upholding journalistic standards. This can be facilitated through partnerships with AI-focused organizations, universities, and non-governmental organizations. Secondly, the

incremental adoption of AI is recommended—integrating tools into low-risk functions such as layout design, headline generation, and copy-editing before extending their use to content creation. Lastly, to preserve audience trust and mitigate the risks of misinformation or bias, newsroom leaders should establish internal guidelines for AI usage.

Furthermore, this study acknowledges its limitations, focusing primarily on newsroom leaders in a small number of outlets. Future research should expand the participant population to include journalists who can provide more granular insights into daily newsroom dynamics and how AI is reshaping journalistic identity and workflow. Comparative studies between Global North and Global South contexts, or between mainstream and alternative media, could also offer a broader understanding of how socio-technical factors influence AI integration in journalism globally. Additionally, audience reception studies on the consumption of AI-generated content in Zimbabwe represent another valuable avenue for exploration.

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